

MENTOR MINUTE

Embracing Diversity in the Early Childhood Classroom

Guest Contributors: Cheryo Johnson, Mariel Gardner, Kyle Worley

Masteropieri, M. & Scruggs, T. (2018) define diversity in the early childhood classroom as encompassing all of the differences that people possess and includes differences in race, language, gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, nationality, exceptionalities, abilities, and geographical placement. Diversity consists of

qualities that make individuals dissimilar and that bring to the classroom their individual experiences, abilities, talents, and character traits. Cultural diversity is fundamental to understanding children and families, their traditions, communication, education and background; acknowledging both



similarities and differences and recognizing different perspectives. Furthermore, teachers who embrace diversity create an exciting, dynamic classroom and provide opportunities for children to understand, respect, and value each other's similarities and differences. The importance and value of diversity is noted throughout the *Rubric for Evaluating North Carolina Teachers*, the *Resource Manual* (2016) and *NC Foundations* (2013) as integral to a child's development and learning. Many examples are highlighted in these resources to support teachers in deepening their understanding and implementation of diversity into the classroom and their teaching practice.

Banks (1999), comments that culture shapes not only our values and beliefs, but also our gender roles, family structures, languages, dress, food, etiquette, approaches to disabilities, child-rearing practices, and even our expectations for children's behavior. In this way, culture creates diversity. A teacher's behavior in the classroom is a key factor in helping all children reach their potential, regardless of gender, ethnicity, age, religion, language, or exceptionality. Teachers have an important role in integrating multicultural



education into their classroom and have influence over the curriculum with their values, perspectives, and teaching styles. Teachers must consider how their own biases (both implicit and explicit) impact their interactions with children and understanding of a situation. The "learning environment and its materials reflect what you do and do not

value by what is present and what is omitted" (NAEYC Position Statement: Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education, 2019). By ignoring young children's attention to these differences, we as professionals unintentionally contribute to the prejudice and stereotypes that they gather from society. In fact, young children's racial beliefs are heavily influenced by their environments (Winkler, 2009).

Reid, J.L., Scott-Little, C. & Kagan, S. (2019), maintain that culture influences both "what" and "how" children learn, or their approaches to learning (concentration and attention, initiative and persistence, and curiosity and exploration). Children build on their cultural experiences in unique ways to develop new understandings and

approaches to new situations in order to make meaning of their world and daily experiences. The authors further state that teachers need a deep understanding of how culture and learning are inherently intertwined. Children's culture, language and learning are "woven into, not added onto, the existing curriculum, so it is a



change in perspective rather than an elaborate new curriculum" (Derman-Sparks, L. & Ramsey, P., 2007., as cited in Lee, H. 2012).

GUIDING QUESTIONS

Guiding Questions Mentors/Evaluators might use with Teachers:

- How are you **intentionally** incorporating diversity of the children into your classroom, on-going lessons, and teaching practice?
- What are some ways that you are incorporating diversity into informal conversations and class discussions?
- Tell us more about the diversity and cultures represented by the children and families of your classroom.
- How does your classroom reflect the diversity of its members?
- How are you bringing in the diversity of others into your classroom and teaching?
- How does your knowledge of diversity influence your teaching strategies, materials, activities, etc.?
- How can you represent and embrace diversity continually in the classroom? (routines, transitions, conversations). Can you share more about any of these you have implemented?
- Why is it important to promote and embrace diversity in the classroom?
- How do you work with culturally and linguistically diverse families in your classroom?
- What challenges do you encounter when teaching a diverse group of children and partnering with their families? What strategies have you used that have been successful?

Useful and Relevant Resources



Funds of Knowledge (2:17 minute video) on importance of learning from our families [HYPERLINK \(right click title and open\)](#)

NC Teaching Standards Module 2 [HYPERLINK \(right click title and open\)](#)

Valuing Diversity: Developing a Deeper Understanding of All Young Children's Behavior [HYPERLINK \(right click title and open\)](#)

Support Diversity, Conversations, and Play. Teaching Young Children, Vol. (2). [HYPERLINK \(right click title and open\)](#)

Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves, Second Edition

"What About People Like Me?" Teaching Preschoolers About Segregation and "Peace Heroes" [HYPERLINK \(right click title and open\)](#)

Howard, T. (2018). Capitalizing on Culture, Engaging Young Learners in Diverse Classrooms. Young Children, Vol. 73 (2).

Kamdar, K. (2019). Connecting Culture and Play: Practical Strategies for Educators. Vol. 12 (3)

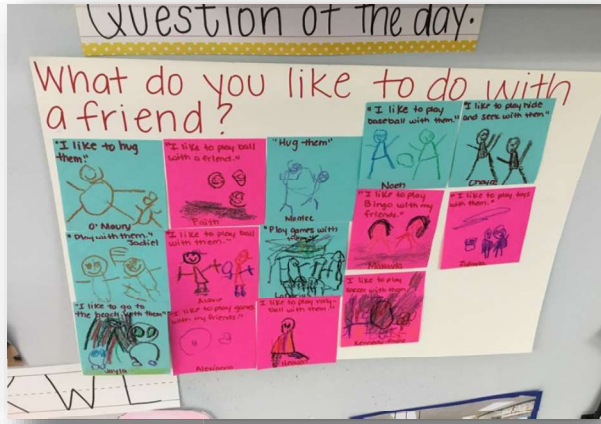
NAEYC (2019). Now Read This! Books that Support Diversity, Conversations, and Play. Teaching Young Children, Vol. (2).



Lee (2012) emphasizes the importance of early childhood educators being reflective of different cultures, but recognizes that educators may not have knowledge and training on how to incorporate diverse cultures and languages into their on-going planning and lessons. Valuing the diversity of children and families is more than labeling classroom materials in different languages or placing a map on the wall or globe on a shelf. The following strategies are an important first step in introducing diversity into a classroom environment. Teachers must be intentional in planning [on-going experiences](#) that are [meaningful to children](#).

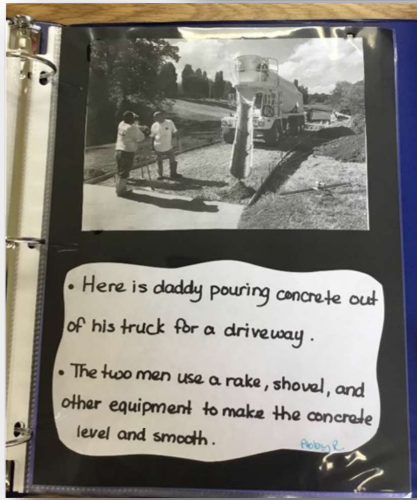
Strategies to consider:

- Intentionally seek out diverse books/authors [throughout the class year](#). (Utilize your local librarian as needed for support). Include books that represent a wide range of voices in the curriculum; teach literature from authors of color. Examine historical narratives to see which voices are missing. (For example, a discussion about the civil rights movement can examine how it intersects with gender, equality, immigration, and the stories of Latino, Asian, African-American, Caucasian and Native American peoples).
- Build relationships with children and their families by intentionally learning about their backgrounds, traditions/customs, socio-economic situation, academic status, and children's interests and learning styles.
- Utilize transitions, routines, and conversations [throughout the day to promote diversity](#).
- Use positive language and reinforce non-typical stereotypes; respond effectively to inappropriate comments or actions. Encourage children to include all of their friends if you see division forming based on differences.
- Promote opportunities for families to connect to school and each other (food drive, recyclables for classroom use, host a parent event, encourage families to share their talents/expertise with class, enlist families support in learning about their culture and language; create class newsletters and activity calendars, and take-home projects).
- Introduce adaptive technologies to support the needs of children with diverse learning styles.
- Use peer grouping to pair children of different abilities and languages with each other to meet the needs of both children (creating opportunities to extend and challenge [ALL children](#)).
- Encourage use of different teaching strategies to meet the needs of the cultural and unique needs of children.
- Encourage all children's participation in class routines, learning activities, and discussions; being aware of children's different learning styles (provide support and accommodations as needed).
- Encourage artwork on the walls that reflects children's lives (my family, my home, what I see on the way to school, birthday traditions, ways I travel to school, foods my family eats, sports, etc.)
- Classroom materials are labeled in the language of the children in the classroom. Teacher intentionally communicates in language of children (learning a few key words or using in classroom environment).
- Promote non-stereotypical learning experiences (books, research, photos).
- Model, support and promote acceptance and inclusion of all abilities (glasses, hearing aids, adaptive equipment, wheelchair, and disabilities).
- Purposefully plan opportunities for children to play together to promote language (blocks, dramatic play scenarios).



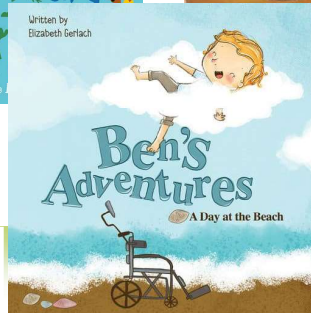
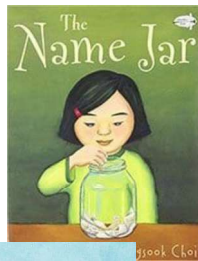
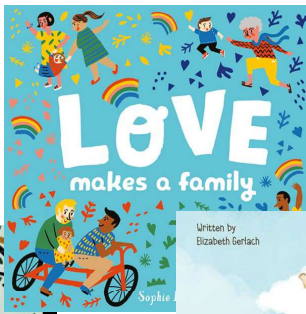
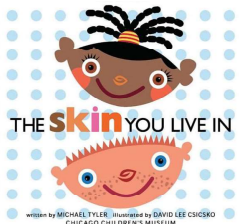
The teacher used, The Question of the day to encourage children to draw pictures and tell "What they like to do with a friend."

Children were encouraged to use open ended materials in art to create where they lived. R. used popsicle sticks to create the apartment building where he lived.



The teacher invited families to share their different jobs with the classroom and then put together into a class book for the classroom.

Books with great messages-



Diverse books in library
(Braille books, books in Spanish, books about different abilities, books about culturally diverse people, etc.)



The Spanish-Language Newspaper, La Noticia newspaper was added to the dramatic play area.

Children created their own center tags by drawing pictures of themselves and writing their names.



Teacher intentionally used Spanish language in learning about trees; children's pictures reflect diversity of children's drawing and writing abilities and their representation of trees. All are celebrated. Foundation goals are on display.